

Within Me, An Invincible Summer by Imperfect_Sentence

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Summary:

Nancy comes to realise she cannot change the circumstances, the seasons, or the wind, but she can change herself.

Within Me, An Invincible Summer

Author's Note:

Apologies to those who read the first iteration of this work: I thought I could make it work as a two-shot but, ultimately, it's better as a one-shot. I figured I would repost so that more people were able to view the finished work.

I really struggled getting this one to work as Nancy stopped talking to me halfway through (don't blame her!). Nevertheless, we got there in the end. Please heed the warnings and enjoy!

"In the depths of winter, I found that there was, within me, an invincible summer." - Albert Camus

It's the coldest Christmas on record.

Nancy stands on the icy shore overlooking the reservoir frozen over for the first time in living memory. Half the town has turned out to see the sunset: pale yellow rays reflecting off the icy surface like the fairy lights still strung throughout Joyce Byers' living room. For once, Jonathan isn't the only one to have brought a camera. Nancy can see flashes going off either side of her and hear the 'click' of shutters. She might have considered bringing her own camera had she not desperately wanted to forget this month had ever happened.

At the edge of the reservoir, her brother and his friends are having a snowball fight. Their crunching footsteps and shouts are stark in the stillness; Nancy can see Chelsea's mother frowning in disapproval. Mike hurls a snowball at Lucas that hits him square in the face. Dustin and Will gasp simultaneously before doubling over with laughter, their cheeks pink, tears turning to crystals at the corners of

their eyes. Mouth agape, Lucas wipes the snow from his face and launches into a predictable rage: arms waving, feet stomping like John McEnroe after an unfavourable point allocation. Spittle flies from his mouth as he screeches about injustice and unfairness and *cheating* at the top of his lungs. He launches himself at Mike and crash tackles him to the ground. Nancy feels the force of the impact in her teeth. A thin crack appears on the water's frozen surface.

"Boys!" Joyce Byers sprints down the bank, her arms flapping, her short brown hair flying everywhere. "Stay away from the water! And quit fighting too!"

Lucas and Mike break apart but not before getting one last jab in. They line up next to Dustin and Will, their heads hanging, feet scuffing in the snow. "Sorry, Ms Byers," they mumble in chorus.

Lucas surreptitiously elbows Mike in the ribs.

Mike yelps. "Ow! Quit it!"

Joyce stands over the boys, hands on her hips. Nancy can't help thinking she cuts an imposing figure despite her small stature. And why wouldn't she? She refused to believe her son was dead even when the police pulled his "body" from this very reservoir. Even when the whole town called her crazy.

The Byers have never much cared what anyone thinks.

Except maybe Will. He rolls his eyes at his mother and heaves a huge, gusting sigh. The tip of his nose is blue despite his the pink in his cheeks. "Everything's fine, mom." His voice is high-pitched and verging on whiny, a normal kid whose mom is embarrassing him. "We were just playing. Can you *please* go away?"

Joyce's eyes have this shiny gleam to them that Nancy has only ever seen in wild horses. She opens her mouth, undoubtedly to say something about how she can't take chances with him after what happened, she *won't*, but Jonathan appears at her side, his tan skin shining, his hair streaked chestnut in the sun. The camera Nancy bought him is hanging around his neck, the lens glinting like the North Star. She tries not to think about the money Steve gave her to

afford it.

Jonathan wraps his arm around his mother's shoulders. "Be nice to mom." His voice is soft and yet it cuts through the chatter like a flashlight through the dark. "You know she worries about you. Besides, she's right. You know if you fall through the ice, it'll freeze back over and you'll be stuck under there?" He makes a face: a crude imitation of a drowning man trapped and scrabbling for breath.

The boys laugh. Joyce laughs too, her birdlike shoulders quaking in Jonathan's embrace. Everyone is safe. Everyone is happy.

Everyone except Eleven.

Everyone except Barb.

Nancy stares across the water at the wintry trees, their bare limbs silhouetted and stretching towards the sky like skeletal fingers. The sun dips below the ridge. A shadow creeps across the water. A breeze kicks up and Nancy pops her collar in a futile attempt to dull the chill.

*

Nancy hunches in the shower just out of reach of the spray. The water heater burst on Christmas Day and the local plumber won't be back at work to fix it until well after New Years. Teeth chattering, she splashes water under her thin, goose-fleshed arms and between her legs before reaching for the soap. No matter how hard she scrubs she never feels clean these days. The soapsuds are claret on her skin: viscera from the tree trunk she'd crawled through looking for Barb, saliva from the monster that killed her friend, sludge from the organs now decaying inside her...

Nancy scrubs until her skin is raw. Until she's shaking so much she can hardly stand.

*

It's well after midnight and Nancy hasn't slept. She's staring at the ceiling, listening to the clock tick, tick, tick. Outside her window, the sky is pitch black – heavy cloud obscuring the moon and stars – and

the wind is an invisible monster, howling and screaming, hurling sleet and thrashing what's left of the trees. Nancy's breath catches at the shadows dancing on her walls. A tap at the window has her heart bursting from her chest.

Steve.

Drawing a shuddering breath, Nancy throws her legs out of bed, feeling the chill of the floorboards even through the plush carpet. Even through her stripy cotton socks. She shuffles to the window. It's frozen shut. The frosted glass obscures Steve's face but she can see him smiling. With his index finger, he draws a heart in the condensation. Nancy's chest constricts. She covers the heart with her hand but whether it's to pull it into her or push it away, she cannot say.

She fumbles with the metal latch, her fingers so numb she can scarcely get a grip. The quicks of her nails are purple and bitten. She throws her weight at the latch. It mercifully cracks open. She shoves the window all the way up, the frigid gale wailing inside, slashing at her curtains and tearing her bed sheets. She can feel the chill all the way to her bones.

Steve slinks inside, his red Converse sneakers landing soundlessly on the carpet. His grace has always impressed her. Despite the weather, his brown hair is stylishly mussed and the collar of his navy polo shirt is crisp, peeking out of his heavy brown coat. He helps shut the window and pulls her into a tight embrace. The left side of his face is still bruised and swollen like a perfect apple that fell out of her hand before she was halfway through. He kisses her mouth. His lips are blue and chapped like hers and she can't help thinking that sucking his tongue is like sucking on an ice cube.

"Brrr, Nancy," he whispers, rubbing her shoulders through her many layers and grinning down at her with straight white teeth. "Feels like I'm hugging a snowman."

She forces a smile. "You can talk."

"Let me warm you up..."

Removing his coat and shoes, he takes her to bed and lies down on top of her, pulling the blankets up over both of them. He removes his clothing and hers piece by piece. He does all the right things. Kisses her softly, slowly. Tells her she's beautiful. Touches her face, her breasts, her thighs...

But it's like trying to kindle a flame with a wet piece of wood.

Her blood used to burn for this but her bones have turned to icicles, sharp and impossibly cold. When he enters her, it hurts. He stops immediately. Asks if she's OK. She nods and pulls him back in, her hands gripping his shoulders, thighs tight around his hips. He starts to move. She closes her eyes. All she can see is Barb at the bottom of the stairs. Barb alone by the side of the pool. Barb in the darkness, screaming for a friend that never came.

Nancy wonders how it's possible to be so close to someone, so filled with someone, and still feel so achingly empty.

*

Nancy hardly sleeps but when she does there's nightmares. She's had them all: the gun jamming, the lighter not working, the monster dragging her back into the woods. But the one that haunts her most is the one where she's drowning.

The reservoir is still frozen over. Only she's not on the shore rather under the water, trapped beneath a thick sheet of ice. She screams, bubbles rising, her palms banging on her glass prison, her nails scoring thick white lines that obscure the cloudless blue sky.

Beneath her, something is coming. Something terrible. She can't look down. She won't. But she does and it's just as terrible as she imagined: the monster with Barb's face, pale and misshapen, the red mouth splitting open her entire skull to reveal row upon row of jagged yellow teeth.

*

The school holidays stretch on. Steve takes Nancy to dinner and then to the local milk bar for a hot chocolate. The girl behind the counter

is new and, of course, she stuffs up the order. She slaps the milkshake on the table in front of Nancy and walks off before she has time to protest.

"I'll call her back over," says Steve, already halfway out of the booth.

"No, don't bother," says Nancy. "This is fine."

She brings the red and white striped straw to her mouth and takes a long, deep sip. The milk is so cold it burns her throat. To keep Steve from seeing her grimace, she looks out the window onto the dark snowy street. The stores have all closed for the night, their doors and windows tightly shut, and the road is empty other than the occasional car driving past, pale zephyrs rising from the exhausts only to be whipped away by the wind just as quickly. But across the road she spies a familiar face.

"Hey, look," says Steve, tapping on the glass. "It's Byers."

Jonathan looks up as if hearing his name. Nancy tells herself that's impossible. And yet there he is, illuminated in the halo of a streetlamp, straddling a shiny red bicycle, a grocery bag hanging off one handle. He lifts his hand in recognition. Nancy lifts hers back. Then he rides off, disappearing down the street, and Nancy places her hand around the icy glass of her drink to avoid thinking about how her palm is burning where she cut it.

She wonders if Jonathan's is too.

*

Nancy and Steve are in the kitchen cutting vegetables. Nancy's parents have accepted the fact they're dating but refuse to acknowledge they're having sex. The rules are unwritten yet unspeakably clear: Steve can stay for dinner but he must leave by 10:30pm. Surely, they know he'll come back later. But the façade seems to suit everyone and so they all play the game.

Nancy slices the onion into thin, equal slices. She used to cry all the time cutting the bloody things but now she doesn't even blink. The sound of the blade hitting the chopping board is almost hypnotic – a

steady metronome she can set her heart to – and it's easy to pretend Steve isn't there. Her mind drifts to yesterday. To the Byers household. She wonders if they're cooking whatever Jonathan was carrying in that grocery bag. Joyce would be a horrible cook, she thinks, but Jonathan has the necessary creative flair and attention to detail to make a marvellous chef.

In her head, he's making soufflé. He's whisking the egg whites and folding them through the yolks, his brow furrowed, his tongue peeking out the corner of his mouth as if developing a particularly important photograph. He pours the mixture into tiny white bowls, taking care to wipe the rims so that they rise evenly. And rise they do. When he pulls them from the oven, from the heat, they are tall and proud and soft and delicate all at the same time. She can almost smell the sweetness. Her mouth waters for a taste.

“Earth to Nancy...”

Nancy jerks at Steve's voice, the knife slipping in her hand and slicing deep into her thumb. She hisses at the sudden flash of pain, bright red blood rolling down her wounded digit, down her hand, and dripping onto the chopping board. A flash of heat races up her arm.

“Shit, Nance,” exclaims Steve. He forages around the kitchen for a long moment, still not sure entirely sure where everything is, before snatching a tea towel off the oven handle and thrusting it into her palm. “Wrap it in this. You gotta put pressure on it to stop the bleeding. You OK?” He wraps his arm around her shoulders and presses a tender kiss to her temple. “I hate seeing you hurt.”

Nancy nods. “I'm fine. Thank you.” She leans into him, holding the towel tight to her thumb. The shock of the pain has dissolved into a dull throb.

It's the first real feeling she's had in days.

*

The razor is light in Nancy's fingers, the edge as fine as the thread separating her world from the Upside Down. The metal is cool but the blood that rises from her wrist is hot and sticky. When it drips

into the sink, scarlet ribbon swirling around the porcelain, she imagines the ice in her veins turning to water and disappearing down the drain.

*

That night, she wakes up screaming. The monster with Barb's face has latched onto her ankle and is dragging her down, down into darkness, and Hell is not fire and brimstone but ice and silence, and she can't breathe for the fear.

Mike races into her bedroom and grabs hold of her arm. His fingers slip on cold sweat. "You OK?" His pointed face is as white as milk.

Nancy inhales huge gulping breaths. Her fingers are still tangled the sheets, her knuckles white and sharp. She slowly relinquishes her grip and touches a hand to her face. Her cheeks are dry like paper. She feels as if she must take a marker and draw her emotions on.

"Can I borrow your walkie-talkie?" she whispers, her voice almost inaudible. "Please."

*

The first time Nancy buzzes through, it's Will who answers.

"What the hell, Mike? It's 3am" His voice is groggy with sleep and a hit of the whininess she remembers from the reservoir. He sounds so young. So alive. "Over."

"Will, it's me. Nancy." And as an afterthought: "Over."

"Nancy? What are you doing on the walkie-talkie? Over."

"I was hoping..." Her voice fails her but she takes a breath starts again. "I was hoping to speak to Jonathan. Over."

For a long moment no one speaks. Nancy can hear static crackling across the line. She pulls her knees tighter to her chest and rests her forehead on her thighs, the walkie-talkie pressed to the frozen shell of her ear.

His voice is soft and yet it cuts through the darkness.

“Nancy?”

*

They talk almost every night after that. So often Mike gifts her with her very own walkie-talkie, the one he got three Christmases ago. The microphone is an older model covered in dust so ingrained she can taste it when she holds it to her mouth. And still, speaking to him like this is better than praying because when she asks a question, Jonathan answers.

*

“Can I see you tonight?”

“Not tonight.”

Steve’s mouth is a thin line against Nancy’s cheek as they embrace. His shoulders are broad beneath his sweater and she can feel the muscles tensing. She remembers a time when she felt safe in his arms but theirs is a war not fought on strength alone. He can’t protect her anymore.

“I’m worried about you, Nance. You feeling OK?”

She nods. She feels nothing.

*

The shallow cuts don’t work anymore. Nancy finds herself digging deeper. Blood cascades down her arm in sticky red rivulets and she has to huddle on the floor of the shower with an old t-shirt pressed to the wound for over an hour before it stops. Her skin is smarting, fire racing up her arm and licking into her chest. It hurts, yes. But pain is only a feeling. One she can control. One she deserves. She imagines climbing into a hot bath, steam rising and fogging the windows, and letting her head sink below the surface, watching the water turning pink then red then black.

*

Nancy hasn't slept in two days. She stares at the ceiling, her body pinned to the mattress under three heavy blankets. And still, she's shivering.

"Can you come over? Please."

A long moment of static.

But then: "OK."

*

Jonathan crawls into bed with Nancy and it's just like the first time. He's taken off his heavy coat and shoes but he's still wearing his black cotton t-shirt and wristwatch though he's wisely swapped his jeans for tracksuit pants. Nancy keeps her back to him, somehow knowing that this will be how it is with them, that this is what they need to do to assuage their guilt and make the fact that he's here with her and she's here with him somewhat OK. She feels him settle on top of the covers, pulling them tighter against her, and the warmth of him spreads across the mattress. He smells like soap underscored with not unlike freshly cut grass. She closes her eyes.

"I'm sorry," she whispers to the open air, her fingers tight on her blanket, two thin creases between her eyes. "It's just that no one understands."

He releases a deep, trembling sigh. "I know."

*

School starts back. Nancy walks along the freshly cleaned, locker-lined corridor, holding Steve's hand. Her hair is perfectly coifed: half up, half down and secured with a white ribbon that matches her sneakers, the pearls in her ears, and compliments her soft blue sweater (the five other layers carefully hidden underneath). She woke before the sunrise and spent close to an hour on her make-up: her lips are pink, her brows smooth, her lashes tinted with brown mascara. The bags under her eyes took the longest and bringing colour to her cheeks was like bringing life to her corpse. She feels like a China doll.

"Wow, you look so thin!" exclaims Chelsea, all memory of the

incident at the cinema apparently forgotten. “What’s your secret?”

Under her sleeves, Nancy’s wrists burn.

*

At lunch, Nancy picks at her food, shuffling limp salad leaves around her plate and hiding them in her handkerchief when she thinks Steve isn’t looking. She excuses herself as soon as is polite and finds herself gravitating towards the darkroom.

Jonathan is already there, just as she knew he would be, hanging photographs to dry on a length of rope suspended between the walls on either side. Nancy recognises the sunset over the reservoir, its beauty somehow more luminescent and powerful in black and white, the sunlight brighter than the snow.

“Are these the first photos you took with the new camera?” asks Nancy, her mouth curiously dry.

Jonathan shakes his head. “Not quite.”

He finishes hanging the last photo and turns to face her: the red light brings out the angles of his face, the shininess in his eyes, the dampness of his lips. He would give her the world if she asked it of him but right now, all she needs is a safe place. Somewhere warm to shed her skin.

“Can I see you tonight?”

*

Nancy wakes to warmth: to the first pale rays of sunlight seeping through the window, to the blankets pulled up to her chin, to Jonathan’s body tangled with her own. He’s curled around her, chest flush against her back, one arm tight around her waist, the other around her chest. His nose is buried in the crook of her neck. She can feel his soft exhalations, his eyelashes fluttering on the shell of her ear, and against her lower back she can feel something, something that kindles a fire in her belly and make her break out in the thinnest sheen of sweat.

She knows it's a just a natural reaction. Something he can neither help nor control. But she's out of control too. Everything she has ever known is a lie: gravity doesn't exist, the world is flat and monsters live beneath her bed on the other side of a tightrope where up is down and down is up, and she can hardly breathe let alone feel and all she wants is to not be so goddamn cold anymore.

She rolls her hips backwards, one tiny experimental movement, and he pulls her closer, his grip tightening, nose pressing deeper into the soft hair at her nape. Still sleeping, he sighs and the only thing hotter than his breath is the hardness at her rear. He grinds against her and his hand slips lower, fingers brushing the waistband of her sleeping pants.

"Nancy..." he sighs, his voice raw and wanting.

She melts in his arms. When she gasps, it's too loud, like her soul is escaping from her body, and her eyes snap open as if the sound is a physical thing she might snatch out of the air and stuff back inside her traitorous mouth. Jonathan jerks away, her hand bolting from her waistband like the wild horses in his mother's eyes. He rolls away from her, taking the warmth with him, and Nancy feels rather than sees him press the heels of his palms to his eyes. Feels his unsteady exhalation through his nose.

He leaves before the alarm without saying goodbye.

*

"I love you, Nancy."

"I love you too."

Nancy falls into Steve's embrace.

She finally got everything she ever wanted and she feels so happy she could die.

*

Nancy bangs her palms against the ice, her nails scoring thick white lines that obscure the cloudless blue sky.

Beneath her, Barb is coming.

And above her, Jonathan is walking away.

*

When she turns to face him, she understands why she kept her back to him all this time. His brown hair is mussed and threaded with fire from the streetlamps, and she can count every freckle on his nose, every crinkle on his brow and at the corners of his eyes. His eyes are half lidded, pupils blown wide. His lips are damp and slightly parted, and he's hardly breathing but she can smell the toothpaste he just used, her toothpaste, and feel the tiniest warm exhalation on her face.

"Nancy," whispers Jonathan, so quietly she scarcely hears it over the thumping of her heart.

She swallows his next breath, pressing her lips to his gently, so gently, and holding them there until he sighs, eyes sliding shut, lashes fanning over his cheekbones. She swipes her tongue, tasting the seam of his mouth, her right hand moving to the V-neck of his shirt, to the exposed skin there. His skin is hot but his lips are hotter, and when she coaxes his mouth open she feels as if she has swallowed a mouthful of boiling tea, the heat of it burning down her throat and thawing her for the first time since the Upside Down spat out the remains of whom she used to be. Her other hand trails down his front and settles on the ridge of him through his sleeping pants. He whines into her mouth and grinds against her. She can feel his pulse, the rushing blood, through both palms.

"Make me feel something," she pleads.

He pulls away from her then, her mouth still chasing. His hand closes around her wrist, removing it from between his legs. She stares at him wide-eyed, but he won't look at her.

"This is a bad idea." His voice is firm despite its rasping edge, and he's breathing too quickly, his pulse fluttering in his neck. He's sitting up in the bed.

"No, it's not." Nancy leans up and tries to kiss him again but he turns his mouth away. Her lips brush the slightest bit of stubble. She grabs his bicep, feels the hard muscle there. "Please, Jonathan."

"You're with Steve." His lips tighten on the name as if swallowing something bitter.

"I—" Nancy fumbles for some sort of response but it's as if she has both too much to say and nothing at all. She thinks she might cry but her tear ducts are ice cubes behind her eyes. She feels sick to her stomach.

When he finally looks at her, the circles under his eyes are darker than she's ever seen them. It's as if the sun has gone behind a cloud. "I'm sorry, Nancy," he says, rising from the bed. "I'm not just some blanket that you can throw on when you're feeling cold."

*

After he leaves, Nancy doesn't rush to the bathroom to cut like she thought she might and she doesn't cry either. She simply opens her window and lies flat on top of her bed, feeling the wind scream inside, the chill of it settling into her bones.

*

"Did you and Jonathan break up?"

Nancy is in the basement, about to set the old walkie-talkie back on the shelf, when the question catches her off guard. She spins around, the walkie-talkie pressed tight to her chest, and sees Mike's pale, pointed face peeking out from underneath the veiled entrance to the blanket fort. Maybe it's not so outrageous that he was able to hide a girl down here for so long...

"You mean, Steve?" Nancy corrects, taking a breath to calm her racing heart.

"No, Jonathan." Mike flings the blanket over the top of the fort to better reveal himself and the nest he's made inside: a walkie-talkie, three battered comic books and a plate of half-eaten waffles. "He's been over here every second night for weeks but now he's stopped."

What's up with that?"

Nancy feels her cheeks heat up. Who knew kids were so damned perceptive? She fiddles with the walkie-talkie in her hands, her fingers tracing the well-worn buttons. "Jonathan and I are just friends," she says, the word a sour candy on her tongue. "We had a bit of a falling out."

Mike quirks one dark eyebrow at her. "So? Lucas and I fight all the time and we're still friends..."

Nancy sighs. "You're too young to understand."

"Don't give me that crap," says Mike, his voice rising slightly. "I understand plenty. What I don't understand is why you're wasting time sucking face with Steve when you clearly like Jonathan."

The heat in Nancy's cheeks rises astronomically. A thin sheen of sweat breaks out on the back of her neck. "No, I don't," she says, flustered. "I definitely don't."

"I thought we agreed: no more secrets, no more lies. Lie to yourself all you want, Nancy, but don't lie to me."

Nancy stomps back up the stairs wondering when the hell her brother became so grown up. She's back in her room before she realises the walkie-talkie is still clenched tight in her fist.

*

Nancy holds the razor to her forearm, seeking fresh flesh amid the scars. Her brother's words are echoing in her ears: *Lie to yourself all you want, Nancy, but don't lie to me.*

The monster laughs, bubbles rising.

She hurls the razor at the wall.

*

When Nancy finds her brother next, he's still in the basement, curled in the blanket fort like he never left. The overhead light has dimmed

and so he's holding a torch over the comic book he's reading – a weird looking little alien splashed across the pages – and stuffing his face full of waffle with his free hand.

Nancy sits down beside the fort, her back resting against the leg of the table underneath. She pulls her knees to her chest.

“How do you do it?” she asks the open air.

Out the corner of her eye, Nancy sees Mike look up from his comic book and tilt his head, dark hair falling in his eyes. “Do what?” The words are slurred through a mouthful of waffle and crumbs are falling from the corner of his mouth. He swipes them with the back of his hand.

“Keep going?” Nancy continues. “You miss El, yeah?”

Mike's muscles tense at the mention of his friend's name. He flicks off the torch and places it down. He folds his place in his comic book and closes the cover too. “Well, yeah, of course,” he says slowly. “I miss her a lot.”

Nancy feels tears pricking her eyes. Real tears for the first time in weeks. The ice within her is starting to crack. “Does it hurt?”

“Sometimes,” Mike admits, “but when it does, I just remember that she's tough and that, wherever she is, she'll be OK.” It's as if he's reciting lines from the Bible and yet she's never heard a preacher speak so ardently, with as much conviction as her brother is speaking to her now. “I know she'll be back soon. She promised to go to the Snow Ball with me.”

The tears overflow. “Barb isn't coming back.”

Mike touches his hand to her arm. “S'not your fault.”

“It is!” She's crying now in earnest. The dam has broken and tears are rolling down her cheeks and her chest is heaving, her body shaking with great wracking sobs. “If I hadn't been so busy hooking up with Steve this never would have happened. She'd still be here. Instead, she's rotting away in that horrible *place* and no one knows but us.”

Mike squeezes her arm. "Nancy..."

"You were right about Steve and I. Things have been falling apart between us but I can't break it off with him because then it will all have been for nothing. Barb would have died for nothing." She takes a huge, snivelling breath, her eyes puffy, her upper lip raw and red. "Besides, he hasn't done anything wrong. It's me, not him. I'm messed up." The sobs overtake her and she can hardly breathe let alone continue. The ice has shattered, pointed shards stabbing her from the inside out.

Mike swallows. He crawls out of the hidey-hole to sit beside his sister and wraps an arm around her shoulders. "Barb wouldn't have wanted you to stay with Steve if he's not right for you. She would have wanted you to be happy."

"But when I'm happy, I forget. I forget her. And if I don't remember her, no one will."

"You have to let go." Will cranes his neck, looking her dead in the eye. "You have to live. If you don't, the monster will take you too then Barb really will have died for nothing. Trust me on this: she doesn't hate you for what you did. You hate you for what you did. Quit bashing yourself up."

Nancy takes a deep breath and presses her fingers into her eyes. Mike's hand hasn't left her shoulder. She leans into him, her tears subsiding, her body drained and trembling.

"You're strong, Nancy," murmurs Mike, wrapping his other arm around her front and holding her tight. "You don't need anyone to save you."

*

The school bell rings and Steve walks Nancy to his car. He turns the engine on to warm it, steam rising from the exhaust, before walking around to open the passenger side for her. The wind is howling and she can feel the first droplets of rain on her skin. She almost crawls inside before stopping short and forcing herself to face him.

“Steve...” she begins, clutching her textbooks to her chest.

Steve looks at her for a long moment. The bruising on his face has almost entirely disappeared and he looks so handsome, so perfect, that Nancy feels her heart constricting, breaking to pieces in her chest. She wants to tell him ‘never mind’, to climb into the car and let him drive them somewhere they can kiss and fuck and forget about the things that keep them awake at night. They could go back to the start when things were good and right and all she ever wanted was to do well at school, go to university, get a good job, marry this boy and settle down in the suburbs with a couple of kids and maybe a dog.

But he gets in first. “You’re breaking up with me, aren’t you?”

She swallows. “How did you know?”

A sad smile. “I know you, Nance. I’ve seen you go after the things you want: grades, medals, people. I can tell when your heart’s not in it anymore.”

“I’m sorry,” she says quickly. “It’s just...”

“It’s not you, it’s me?” he finishes with a half-hearted chuckle.

Nancy blushes. Looks at her feet before forcing herself to meet his gaze. He deserves that at least. “I need to sort myself out. You’ve been great, perfect even, but something’s been broken in me since Barb died and only I can fix it.” A beat. “I hope you understand.”

Steve wraps his arms around Nancy’s shoulders and presses a kiss to the crown of her head. “I only ever wanted what’s best for you, Nance. I want you to want that too.”

Nancy nods into Steve’s chest, a warmth like sunshine diffusing through her. She grips the back of his coat. “Thank you, Steve.”

“No problem.” He pulls away, gesturing through the open door. “Now, let me give you a ride home, for old times sake.”

Nancy gets into the car and buckles her seatbelt. Through the windscreen, she can see that the rain has stopped as quickly as it started.

*

Nancy bangs her palms against the ice and this time, cracks appear above her head. Eyes wide in disbelief, she smacks harder and harder. A tiny hole opens up. She scratches, claws. The hole gets bigger. She can fit a hand through, then an arm, and then her head is above the water and she's coughing and spluttering and choking, but she's breathing, she's actually breathing.

She bobs to the edge of the ice and tries to haul herself out. But it's too slippery: she can't get a grip. Something wraps around her ankles. The monster. She nearly screams, but rather than pulling her down, it pushes her up and her belly slides along the ice until she's completely out of the water.

Nancy flips herself onto her bottom and scoots to the edge of the hole. She stares down into the frozen depths. Barb is staring back at her. She looks as she did the last time Nancy saw her. As she did on the night she disappeared.

"Your brother was right," says Barb, her voice clear in Nancy's head. "Let me go and I let you go, that's how it works."

"But Barb..." says Nancy.

But it's too late. She's sinking back into the depths, her red hair floating like ribbon above her head.

*

Barely a day has passed before the school is buzzing with the news: Nancy and Steve are broken up. The perfect power couple are done. Over. Finished.

I always said he was too good for her. She's such a nerd. So boring. I'll bet she's frigid. He was the one who called it, yeah? What? No way! You can't be serious! What was she thinking? Surely, she knows can't do better? I heard it had something to do with the Byers kid... Have you seen the way he looks at her? He's such a weirdo. A total freak.

Nancy flicks her hair and keeps on walking.

*

She steers clear of Jonathan for weeks. The choice is a conscious one borne out of respect for Steve, respect for Jonathan, respect for herself... She buries the walkie-talkie in the basement and walks the other way when she sees him. She takes the time and day-by-day, week-by-week, the weather warms and she begins removing her sweaters layer by layer.

*

When the first buds of spring begin to dot the trees, Nancy borrows her parents' car and drives to the Byers' house. She parks the car, gets out and walks slowly towards the front door. The snow has almost melted, just a few clumps dotted here and there, and birds are chirping in the trees, plucking bugs out of the damp wood. The sun feels warm on her face. The air smells fresh and alive.

She knocks on the door, three quick taps.

But no one answers and she's standing there so long, she begins to wonder if maybe she left it too late, if the seed she thought was there has shrivelled in the ice, died in the ice, never to sprout or grow or bloom.

She's halfway off the porch when the door swings open. She freezes mid-step, her heart leaping to her throat. She'd know that voice anywhere.

"Nancy?"

*

Jonathan tells her Will is with Lonnie. That Joyce is having dinner with Hop. The latter part surprises her, but who is she to judge who people fall for? Who they pick, not to complete them, but to make their lives infinitely better, like icing sugar on a soufflé?

*

They sit next to each other on the brown threadbare couch, a respectful distance between them. The room is still scattered with

fairy lights and the wall behind them bears the alphabet scrawled in heavy black paint, like blown-up Ouija board only twice as fucked-up. Despite the calming aroma of the herbal tea in her hands, Nancy can smell the unmistakable scent of cleaning products underpinned with gasoline. She closes her eyes.

“Sorry for the mess,” says Jonathan, noticing the twitching of Nancy’s nose, the tension in her shoulders and neck. “We were going to take the lights down and everything but I guess we’re not ready to go back to normal yet.”

Nancy breathes a half-hearted chuckle. “I don’t think we can ever go back.”

A heavy silence settles over the room. Nancy can hear the fairy lights buzzing, one or two flickering, like the static over the walkie-talkie. She keeps her gaze fixed straight ahead on the patch of carpet where the two of them stood, knives in hand, ready to take on a monster. She remembers staring into Jonathan’s dark eyes, the metal cold in her palm, hearing his slow count to three. Her whole body was shaking, tears in her eyes. *You don’t have to do this.* And in the present moment, she feels the same fear: two choices looming before her.

“Why are you here?” asks Jonathan, his voice low and quiet.

Should I stay or should I go?

“I can’t stop thinking about you.”

*

Jonathan’s bedroom is covered in fairy lights.

He pulls her shirt over her head. And his eyes are not drawn to her breasts or the curve of her waist but to the scars on her forearms, thin red lines stacked on top of one another, neat and cramped not unlike her handwriting. She blushes with mortification and tries to tuck her arms into her chest but Jonathan catches one wrist and holds it out in front of her.

“It’s OK,” he whispers, running the pad of his left thumb over the most recent mark, perpendicular to the knob of her wrist. With his

other hand, he undoes his wristwatch, the band coming loose to reveal a crisscross of scars, faded and white but visible nonetheless.

Nancy traces the scars with a fingertip before staring into his face. She's still wearing clothes and yet she's never felt more naked.

"Why did you start?" she murmurs.

A shy chuckle. "I was a weird white trash kid with a crazy mom and a deadbeat dad. I didn't have any friends."

"Why did you stop?"

"I decided I was more than that."

*

Jonathan kisses with the care and precision of someone painting something very small.

"Is this what you want?" he asks, his voice low and quiet, pinning her heart to her spine. Even then he keeps his face carefully blank: the expression of a man that expects to hear the word 'no', even with her trembling against him in the twinkling half-light.

"Yes." The word doesn't come out as confident as she intended it. But it's bone-deep longing that clogs her throat and softens her voice.

He touches her all over then. Her face, her neck, her collarbones, her breasts. His hands smooth down her flanks, his fingers, callused from the shutter release, shaking as if touching something sacred. He presses a fire-trail of kisses down her neck and it's only then that she can hear over the roaring in her ears that he's talking to her. Her name is a mantra, a one-word song: *Nancy, Nancy, Nancy*.

Her stomach has never felt this way before, corkscrews of heat like the lighter igniting, like the gasoline catching fire, only she would gladly die from this; their bodies pressing so tightly together that no monster, no nightmares, no death exists between them.

He pulls her jeans off her legs and touches a finger between her thighs. She's so slick, she swears she's melting, her eyes glazing over,

her skin much too tight for her body.

"Tell me how," he whispers, his dark eyes huge, black almost swallowing the brown.

And so she does. Her hand slips down, down between them, her fingers twining with his and moving in slow, maddening circles that make her breath catch in her throat, her muscles tensing in her belly. He kisses her throat, his lips hovering over the pulse, and all she can smell is his hair, slick and sticking to his neck, fresh like spring flowers. Like new beginnings.

When he pushes inside her, it's not like finding the last piece of the puzzle, filling an empty space in her heart, or coming home. But he's learning from her and she's learning from him, and it's good and right and perfect.

And she wants to do it again.

*

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting," she whispers in the aftermath.

"I'd have waited forever."

*

Nancy and Jonathan stand on the muddy shore overlooking the reservoir. The ice has melted but the water is utterly still, a mirror reflecting the sun. Ducks glide across the surface, their feathers glistening, lines of duckings at their tails. Fish throw themselves into the air and splash back down. Crisp green leaves cover the trees on the opposite bank, their branches alive with birds and small mammals. The air smells fresh and clean. And the world is singing with life.

Jonathan takes Nancy's hand. "Have you thought about what you'll do when we finish school?"

She looks at him and smiles. "Anything. Everything."